

ECONOMIC VITALITY COMMITTEE
AGENDA – September 2, 2020

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- Call to Order
- Administrative Matters
 - Approval of meeting Minutes from August 19, 2020
- Updates from the Town
- Update from Concord Together
- Updates from Committee members
- Recommendations to Consider
- Other Business
- Open Session/Public Comment
- Adjournment

PRESENT: Cato Anderson, John Boynton, Remon Karian, Mark Martines, Jennifer McGonigle, Jane Obbagy, Jennifer Schunemann, Debra Stark, Jan Turnquist, Steven Verrill, Beth Williams

ABSENT: Dawn Rennert

ALSO PRESENT: Susan Bates, Select Board; Stephen Crane, Town Manager; Jeremy Romanul, Select Board Asst.; Gail Hire

CALL TO ORDER AND ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS

Co-Chair Jennifer Schunemann called the meeting to order and welcomed all in attendance.

MINUTES

Upon a motion duly made and seconded, it was:

UNANIMOUSLY VOTED by roll call:

To Approve the Minutes of August 5, 2020.

Cato Anderson	Aye
John Boynton	Aye
Remon Karian	Aye
Mark Martines	Aye
Jennifer McGonigle	Aye
Jane Obbagy	Aye
Jennifer Schunemann	Aye
Debra Stark	Aye
Jan Turnquist	Aye
Steven Verrill	Aye
Beth Williams	Aye

UPDATES FROM THE TOWN

Beth Williams reported that there has been more activity in the three retail centers. There has been a general uptick in foot traffic that was increased by the sidewalk sales. The addition of picnic tables has been great with thanks to the ten families that participated in painting and preparing them. Attendance at the Visitor and Information Center has increased to forty per day and Tours are running with terrific interest. She indicated that she will be contacting the schools regarding a tie to local history.

At least fifteen shops participated in the August sidewalk sale and most reported that it brought in a mix of local regional, and tourist shoppers. Shoppers behaved responsibly and appreciated that Concord was taking the COVID emergency responsibly as well. Ms. Williams stated that the movie nights were a great opportunity for community engagement and a morale booster. Discussions are in place to consider a third movie if sponsorship can be identified.

Town Manager Stephen Crane stated that Town Counsel has expressed the opinion that Henry Dane's proposal to use the Select Board's emergency powers under the Civil Defense Act to establish a low interest/no interest revolving fund program to help local businesses survive the current emergency would require Town Meeting to approve instead of solely the Select Board. Since this is not on the Annual Town Meeting Warrant, it must be on hold for now. This could be considered at a future Town Meeting.

However, Mr. Crane has discovered that the Light Board, while not able to discount electric rates for businesses as recommended by the Committee, can manage a 50% rebate, up to a

limit of \$1,000, for electrical outdoor heaters for use by restaurants or any business for keeping shoppers queueing outdoors warm.

Committee discussion focused on what the committee could do to encourage further action on the Henry Dane proposal. A low interest/no interest revolving fund program to help local businesses survive the current emergency is needed now, not at some future date. The funds could be used for grants, loans, abatements, and other concessions to sustain the economic viability and culture of the Town. The damage to the Town from loss of businesses could be significant. Is this worth calling a Special Town Meeting or a Special Town Meeting within the Annual Town Meeting on September 13? It could also benefit discussion if the basis of the opinion of Counsel was better understood. If there were more detail on the Emergency Powers and the limitations of Town Meeting, the committee could develop a better response.

There has been no update from the town of Ashland regarding the Block Grants, however, the plan has been for an August/early September implementation.

UPDATES FROM CONCORD TOGETHER

Co-Chair John Boynton shared and reported on the responses received from the recent business survey. This will be posted to the Concord Together website. In the limited one-week turnaround, thirty-eight responses from retail, restaurants, and landlords were received and compiled. 18% of those polled applied for Community Chest grants of up to \$2,500; 44% of those replying are feeling the impact of the health emergency; respondees are split evenly on whether the Summer Solstice Event helped business; there was strong agreement that email is the best form of contact; regarding trending, 18% felt July was a better month than the past April, but 40% felt it was not. Regarding whether business was sustainable, 21% reported the business was sustainable now, 8% felt sustainability was a long way off if ever, and the remainder were spread across needing 10% to +50% business increases to be sustainable. 10% of respondees have made the decision to close or retire early, with 42% okay for now, but worried.

Committee discussion noted the disconnect in the respondent's information. Mark Martines questioned how April business could have been better than July when business was shuttered in April. Further, trending information is in conflict if 31% indicate there has been no material change, 53% indicate business is better or much better, and 15% indicate business is worse or much worse. Jennifer McGonigle noted that because a business has resources now, does not mean that it will decide to invest those resources forever. She suggested asking in the next survey to compare with sales data a year ago or when businesses closed due to the pandemic. It is not clear how long businesses can continue with subpar results. Debra Stark suggested comparative questions for those whose businesses did not close. Jennifer Schunemann suggested that questions specific to landlords should be included in a separate survey instrument as some responses to this round are confusing, perhaps conflating landlord and tenant information.

John Boynton announced that the Challenge Grant offered by a Concord family if the fund reached \$100,000 has been met! The Rasmussen family, which usually focuses their philanthropy on historical and cultural issues, has fulfilled its promise, bringing the total funds available to \$200,000 and reinforcing the notion that local businesses are a strong component of our cultural heritage in Concord. This generous contribution and those that it will encourage will enable the fund to help many more businesses. Everyone should spread the word about the application process.

Jennifer Schunemann reported that the Passport program was a resounding success and that Concord Together hopes to build something similar with a *Fall in Love with Concord* event to attract more visitors and shoppers. She suggested that residents might be

encouraged to donate gifts and gift cards from their favorite local shop instead of depending upon businesses to do all the giving. She also noted that there is ongoing discussion regarding a restaurant program focus as suggested by Remon Karian. She noted that Concord Together has invested in a number of *Invest in Concord* yard signs that will be available at the Visitor Center for those who are interested in posting one. Mark Martines suggested that we need to further educate fellow citizens and shoppers by posting signs in shop windows or wearing buttons to start conversations. Stephen Crane suggested putting up a display at Town Meeting to make the case. Remon Karian suggested a broader social media presence, using a Visit Concord hashtag.

There is interest in a Holiday Market as a way to use outdoor spaces while preserving social distance better than in a crowded shop. A sidewalk sale is a series of events but closing the street for an outdoor market is one large event. Stephen Crane noted the Governor's guidelines prohibiting such festivals. Beth Williams stated that the Recreation Department is working on modifying some of their annual community events such as Trunk or Treat to limit or manage large gatherings. The Christmas Stroll/Tree Lighting is too large without moving it. John Boynton stated that in his opinion it is better to keep planning events such as Virtual Concord for local vendors private until rollout as they are too complex to accomplish when limited to monthly public meetings. Perhaps involving Minuteman Media Network regarding broadcasting/live streaming short volunteer-produced business ads can be investigated. MMN and the Town website could also run snippets from Visit Concord to highlight shops and local owners to connect and bond with neighbors. Jane Obbagy reported that the Chamber has a library of such short videos that could be refreshed and used. High school students who have a better grasp of these issues, in return for community service credit, could be enlisted to assist business owners to generate content on a mobile phone to be uploaded to a website or television station.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Gail Hire stated that she likes what Concord Together is doing and looks forward to the next passport event. She recommended that parents with kids become involved.

Stephen Crane expressed his appreciation for the work of John Boynton who introduced the notion of making donations to the business grant fund and followed up seeking and promoting contributions.

Select Board member Susan Bates reminded all of the upcoming Annual Town Meeting on September 13. This will be outside on the Doug White Field at CCHS high school.

Cato Anderson noted that most members had responded to meeting times and that 4PM is preferred now. That could change when school is in session.

ADJOURNMENT

Upon a Motion duly made and seconded, it was

UNANIMOUSLY VOTED by roll call:

To adjourn the meeting at 6:25 PM.

Cato Anderson	Aye
John Boynton	Aye
Remon Karian	Aye
Mark Martines	Aye
Jennifer McGonigle	Aye
Jane Obbagy	Aye
Jennifer Schunemann	Aye
Debra Stark	Aye
Jan Turnquist	Aye
Steven Verrill	Aye
Beth Williams	Aye

Respectfully submitted
Cato Anderson, Clerk
Approved:

DRAFT